Wolcott Community Forest Committee, General Meeting Notes -7/20/23

Attending: Roger, DJ, Gabe, Mike Green, Kurt, Sheila, Gordon, Dave, Mariah, Hayden, Bruce W., Cate, Maxfield, Dolan, Joe, Luke, Bill, Kate W.

1. Call to order (6:02pm)
2. Organizational actions
    1. Amendments to agenda
        - Emily Potter, not able to attend
            - perhaps schedule a special meeting
        - Mariah (Sinuosity) is present to talk about forming a Trails Committee
    2. Approve minutes from last two meetings
        - May meeting:
        - June meeting:
            - add Maxfield to attendance (done)
        - no other comments
            - both approved unanimously
    3. New committee member – Sheila Halpin
        - no questions
        - excited about the town forest and glad to chip in
3. Public comment
    - none
4. Land purchase updates
    1. Status report from TPL
        - Town was successful in obtaining funding from Forest Service; received full $540K requested
            - in a good position to move forward with closing
            - still working on funding the affordable housing portion; required surveys, etc.
                - work is being done with an engineer to define the plot
            - Lamoille County Planning Commission - waiting on them to approve funding Phase 2 for Biddell property
            - working with Rhoda Biddell to address property encroachments; one lawn, one shed
            - old cabin remnants have been removed; thanks Cole; site has been fully naturalized, no remains
            - Gordon: what is the path to closing?
                - Hayden:
                    - wrap up Phase 2
                    - NRLT and VHCB must finalize work for the conservation easement, inc. required mapping
                    - and the Stewardship Plan
                - Gordon:
                    - closing date?
                        - Hayden: earliest is in January, maybe later
                - Dave: will it become property of TPL?

- Hayden: TPL acquires it formally, but simultaneously is acquired by the town; transferred to town ownership almost immediately (directed deed)

5. New business (6:15 pm)
    - County Forester, Emily Potter
        - not present
            - call a special meeting?
                - Gordon: available in this time slot next week; how do people feel about another meeting this month?
                    - Cate: not available
                - Hayden: conservation plan is not included in the submitted documentation, but it is common for a management plan in place (approved by NRLT)
                    - Gordon: not forestry actions on the short list
                        - Mariah: would like to meet with Emily and you (Gordon) and me offline to coordinate
                    - Hayden: let's not wait to complete the other elements as we work on a plan with Emily
                        - let's aim for next regular meeting
                - Gordon: please review the SP draft this month
                    - Roger: a clean copy with accepted changes will be made available
    - Forming a trails committee
        - Mariah, Sinuosity:
            - some materials sent, please review when you have a chance
                - (see provided slide show)
            - includes our professional portfolio (for those who have since joined the conversation)
            - specialize in non-motorized trails; design and construction
            - background
                - (see past meeting notes, re: select board approval)
                    - will be a challenge to complete in 3 years: breaking new ground
            - want to provide for enjoyment of the natural world while disturbing as little of it as possible
            - using survey and public meeting to determine how the trail network will be used, what the experience will be
                - (see shared materials)
                - as different features of the landscape are identified and added to the map, the proposed trail network evolves accordingly
                - want to create opportunities for more people without impacting the feeling of moving through the forest
                - people often go to areas where there are multi-use trails; these areas are popular

- surveys don't capture the voice of all groups (for ex: kids)
- ideal trails must to be properly sloped and drained

- (Discussed displayed map of proposed trails)
  - disclaimer: map is just a draft; trails and paths are not final
  - 5 miles of proposed trails have been mapped; would require adding significant draining to preserve the completed trails
    - Luke: if there is change of use, can't cross a wetland
      - Hayden: permitting is currently under review
      - Mariah: proposed in order to facilitate that process
  - color-coding: used to differentiate trail types (i.e., pre-existing logging road vs. narrower trail)
    - signifies level of disturbance, rather than impact due to use
    - Gabe: what is the risk to hikers from bikers?
      - Mariah: design choices can reduce impact by varying uses (i.e. sight-lines) to maximize safety
    - Luke: will material be brought in?
      - Mariah: minimal material will be used in most of the trail construction as proposed
    - Gilly: blind areas with no trails; why no trails there?
      - Mariah: some areas are not good placements; some could be fine, but may not meet identified objectives; there could be increased density, but the scope was only for 5 miles; potential areas have been identified, as future stepping stones
    - Gilly: Bourne property- have you explored that yet?
      - Mariah: primary concern is connectivity to other trails; south side, there are many natural barriers; north side, very steep so not likely to have bi-directional trails without significant effort, additional cost; still searching for ideal areas of connectivity; will be spending more time out there; waiting on rare species data, too
    - Gilly: can we walk proposed trails with you at some point?
      - Mariah: that leads into next steps; will return to that
    - Maxfield: is it possible to mow a perimeter path?
      - Mariah: there is an opportunity on the upper side, but gets quite wet in the middle; mowed trails need to be maintained

        - regularly (cost concern), and may invite invasive species; would require good practices
- Gordon: should we expect a trail plan from Sinuosity, or Sinuosity provides the initial trails from which to build off of?
    - Mariah: core question is "how much trail do you need for an experience?"; 5 mi. is a min. size to feel substantial experience; more would be great if the stewardship evolves accordingly, which includes voices that haven't been heard yet, and identifies solutions for maintaining the trails; build leadership, a trails committee, to coordinate volunteer labor; then expand as appropriate; watch for rogue trail bulding to identify voices of those not in the room
- DJ: we've talked about leaving Bourne property wild; may invite rogue trail building on that property; how might that play out?
    - Mariah: several factors - how many people, how many of those want to cut trails, how many would continue to use and develop those trails on rugged terrain? not imagining much of that (not many inviting places for this in that part of the property); highly doubt it, but campers/squatters are a possibility; if there is a need for trails to accommodate the interest, you can proactively decide where the trail should lie; eyes on the ground allow for management decisions as use increases
- Kate W: conservation easement requires approval for any new trail building; rogue trails are a problem, and must be assessed first before developing them; public must be made aware of this
    - Gordon: so its better to fight the rogue trail builders rather than upset the conservation easement
        - Kate W: yes
        - Hayden: easement holders often discover rogue trails and communicate them to the town
- Cate: what about hunting? do they impact the trails?
    - Mariah: that is a whole doffeent discussion, as it includes management decisions

(seasonal trail closures, etc.); usually based on safety concerns and history of the land; not expected to have major trail impacts beyond normal use

- Maxfield: winter use - is the slope perpendicular to the direction of travel (in regards to skiing)?
    - Mariah: out slopped 2-5%; fine for skiing
- Gabe: is skiing being considered?
    - Mariah: similar in ways to Cricket Hill; hard to open trails for one use per season; hard to get the correct turn radius with this topography; some backcountry opportunities; connectivity is challenging in terms of looping back to starting point
- Gabe: where are we with permitting?
    - Mariah: Kate, are there any updates that may impact the proposed design? general, wetlands or stormwater, low impact...
        - Kate: the town will work with you on permitting; the school will need some updating but can help
- Luke: so its shovel ready right?
    - Mariah: not quite; this is the draft, but maybe the Select Board needs to sign off on the design before we proceed; once approved, then we flag the trails; just need to know the right time to approach the Select Board, once we invite on-the-ground stewardship
- Gilly: this returns us to my last question: can we walk the proposed trails before the select board votes? this is our work, to review the proposal before the SB considers it?
    - Mariah: note we have never walked a design concept before finalizing the design; not a usual requirement; could share map data for independent exploration
        - Gordon: so the lines on that map are not final, but reasonably close; could deviate from the proposal as it is built; we can engage and provide input as we move forward with construction
            - Mariah: there are questions about the type of trail vs. placement of the trail; it is

        - not easy to move a trail once an ideal path has been identified
- Dave: since this work was authorized before the committee was formed, they should be allowed to do their work; we have a very limited voice about where the trails lie in this process; let's do it
    - Mariah: yes, but we do welcome input as well; moving forward, we would like to invite information regarding desired use; focus on user experience rather that the physical trail
    - Hayden: as this concept is being built, review all the previous work related to public feedback; this helps to guide this experience; what matters most in this trail experience? this map is not showing all of the collected data, but it is being used by this professional team; these trails make sense
- Roger: parking details?
    - Hayden: included in the grant paperwork; the bridge parking lot will be smaller; upper parking lot would be the main parking area
    - Mariah: 10 parking spots total
- Joe: is all of the proposed work included in the VORAC grant?
    - Mariah: oh, yes; there is always the chance of something unexpected, but those things are "sucked up" by us
- Dave: I like the locations; they make sense to me

        - Maxfield: when this released, will the other layers be added? this may comfort people
            - Mariah: we do have a more detailed copy, but would be harder to read; it would answer some questions, but maybe not all
        - Cate: this is an amazing job with all of the variables
        - Joe: what is the deadline?
            - Mariah: our deadline may move forward in time, as we pursue extensions; depends on how quickly it drains: will be hiring people to help get this done
            - Hayden: good pivot to talk about the bridge...
            - Mariah: would like to flag this fall; and finish in the spring
    - Gordon: this is the beginning of this trail-building process, not the end
- Mariah: who is the finalizer before we proceed?
    - Hayden: the Select Board, since they were the contributors that led to the VORAC grant
        - Mariah: may create opportunities for others to get involved
- Mariah: proposed bridge site...
    - it's a dynamic flood plain; will need revitalization; needs to be reassessed, as the cost of the bridge will be significantly higher knowing how the landscape has changed; original concept did not consider an event of recent magnitude; may not be the best use of resources; existing bridge withstood the flood, and may be a better point of crossing; enhancing safety along the road to use the existing crossing would be a better use of resources
        - Sinuosity can't decide to change how funds are used, but they can ask
            - Hayden: due to the impact of the storm, we could ask them

to make changes to use original grant slightly different

- Gordon: what do you need from this committee tonight?
  - Hayden: we can't ask for approval tonight as this section will change
    - Mariah: we are documenting impacts, but we are not sure exactly what will be permitted
  - DJ: what was allocated in VORAC?
    - Mariah: about $35,000

6. Adjourn (8:15 pm)

- ----------Not discussed due to lack of time----------

- Outreach and programming
- Mapping subcommittee, update
- Stewardship plan draft subcommittee, update
- Newsletter, update
- Public engagement
  - Town BBQ, September 8
- Upcoming events